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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Agricultural Research Service
Animal Husbandry Research Division

Homing Pigeons: Their Care and Training

The raising of homing pigeons is a hobby shared by at least 50,000 pigeon fanciers in the United States. During peacetime, these birds are kept chiefly for racing. In wartime, many racing pigeons are supplied by Civilian pigeon fanciers to the Department of the Army; the birds are often used as a means of communication during active warfare.

The remarkable ability of these pigeons to return to their homes has been so well developed in some birds that they have returned in 2 days from distances of more than 1,000 miles. Flights of over 600 miles a day have also been made.

Both breeding and training contribute to the development of the homing instinct.

Selection and Breeding

Obtain stock that has performed well in competitive flights. Any color except white is satisfactory; white birds are undesirable because they can be seen readily by hawks. Eyes should be prominent and bright.

Characteristics to breed for are strength of constitution and vigor. Never breed pigeons until they are well developed and nearly a year old. Best breeders are from 1 to 3 years old. Many of the greatest winners have been bred from yearlings and from 2-year-olds.

Pigeons may be allowed to mate naturally and retain their mates provided that they are not too closely related. In forced matings male and female pigeons are placed by themselves for about 10 days. Mates usually remain true to each other as long as they are together. A breeding pair is kept together long enough to raise two or three broods then separated. Good breeders will continue to produce well for four to five years.

It takes 17 days for pigeon eggs to hatch. The female will lay again when the young are 3 weeks old. Both parent birds feed the squabs until they are 4 to 5 weeks old.

Pigeons from the first hatch, in April, are usually the best performers, but those hatched during other spring months often make excellent records.

Keep an account of dates of matings, dates eggs are laid, and dates of hatching. These records will be needed later in choosing birds for races.

Management

Home to the racing pigeon should be a comfortable loft where it gets good attention and plenty of feed.

Arrangement of Loft

Arrange the loft so that it is convenient for handling the birds and is easy

to clean.

Divide it into at least two sections. During breeding season, one section is for older birds and one for the younger. During the rest of the year, the sexes may be kept separate in the two sections.

For each breeding pair, supply a double nest about 15 inches high, 12 inches wide, and 30 inches long. Place two nest bowls inside.

Small outside aviaries (wire-covered pens) may be attached to the house, if desired. These are not necessary, however, because pigeons usually are allowed to fly free outside the house almost every day.

A solid lighting perch is desirable. Provide a "bob" wire or some other type of one-way opening through which the pigeons can enter the loft. A "bob" wire is a series of wires arranged in a frame in such a way that pigeons can push the wires open from the outside, but not from the inside. This entrance should be at the front of the loft; if there is an aviary, place the entrance to the loft just above it. Make sure that no animals other than pigeons can get into the loft through this entrance.

Put a small catching pen just inside the entrance. In this pen you can catch pigeons immediately when they return from a flight.

Feed

Homing pigeons need a mixture of whole grains and seeds; they do not do well on feed commonly used for chickens.

Most pigeon raisers use commercial mixed pigeon feeds. These are made up of Canada peas, small corn, kafir, hempseed, vetch, and canary and other seeds. The better, more expensive mixtures contain more peas and more of the higher priced seeds than the cheaper mixtures.

Feed the best mixtures during racing season. Breeding birds may be fed a cheaper mixture when they are not racing.

Keep feed before breeding birds at all times. Feed other pigeons twice a day; either put the feed in shallow hoppers or scatter it on the floor of the loft. In general, feed commercial feeds according to the directions of the manufacturer. A mineral mixture is sometimes made available. Keep pigeon grit available to the birds at all times.

Water

Always have plenty of fresh drinking water in the loft. Unless birds are accustomed to finding fresh water always available, they may stop during a race to drink. Arrange drinking vessels so that the pigeons cannot get into them to get the water dirty.

Provide the birds with water for bathing on 2 or 3 days of each week in the summer and on 1 or 2 days each week in winter. Leave bathing pans in the loft for only 3 or 4 hours.

Training

To be successful racers, pigeons must be trained carefully. Teach them a very little at a time. Be sure they have mastered one step before you go to the other.

Before the birds begin their training flight, teach them a signal for feeding time. Each time you feed them, whistle, rattle the feed in a can, or make some similar noise. The birds will soon learn to associate this noise with feeding time. You will use this signal during training to teach the birds to come into the loft immediately. Birds must be taught to enter the loft quickly when they return from a flight so there will be no delay in timing them for races.

Release the birds only when they are hungry, so they will want to return to the loft to eat. Always feed them immediately when they return.

First Flights

Let the birds fly free the first time when they are about 5 weeks old. Release them in the evening and let them fly for about half an hour. By that time they will be hungry enough to come in when you give the signal for feeding time. Leave the traps in the loft open so the pigeons can come in quickly after they land on the loft.

After the first flight, let the birds fly twice each day before they are fed - as early in the morning and as late in the evening as possible. Continue these flights for 6 to 8 weeks, or until the pigeons become familiar with the area surrounding the loft.

The birds are then ready to begin distance training.

Distance Flights

For best results, train the pigeons very carefully for short distances especially for the first 5 or 10 miles. After the birds have been trained for distances up to 25 miles, the distances may be rapidly increased to 100 miles.

For the first distance flight, put the pigeons in a carrying basket the night before. Leave them in it all night to accustom them to the basket. The next morning take the basket about 1 mile from home. Release the birds one at a time. Be careful as you take each pigeon out of the basket and as you let it go.

A few days later, take the birds 2 miles away for their second distance flight. This time, put the birds in the basket early in the morning and take it in the direction in which the pigeons are to make their competitive flights. Release the birds one at a time as for the first flight.

Make the third flight a collective toss, 5 miles from the loft. That is, release all the birds at one time two or three weeks before the first race.

On the next flight, increase the distance to 10 miles. Then continue with flights of 15, 20, 25, 50, 75 and 100 miles. The tosses can be collective after the third flight. The birds need to get accustomed to collective tossing, as in races.

Management of Races

Pigeon races are conducted by organized groups of pigeon owners. These groups are organized both locally and nationally. Most local associations are affiliated with some national association. Each member of an association owns a clock to be used for timing pigeons in a race.

Usually a race is in charge of the race committee of a local organization. The seamless-band numbers of the pigeons to be entered in the race are recorded on the race sheet; then the birds are turned over to the race committee, a countermark with a recorded number being placed on each bird's leg. Before the race, the timing clock of each entrant is properly set and sealed by the racing committee and returned to the owner.

When the pigeon finishes the race, the owner traps it, removes the association's countermark from its leg, and places the countermark in the clock. The owner then returns the clock to the racing committee and the winner of the race is determined after the committee checks all the returned clocks.

In long distance races, pigeons usually are released as early in the day as possible. Pigeons ordinarily fly from daylight until dark. The distance they cover in one day depends on the weather as well as on breeding and training. In good weather, young birds can fly about 300 miles in a day; old birds about 500 miles.

Before the young birds are entered in their first race, they should be fed and watered in the training crate or basket until they become accustomed to its use.

Selection of Birds for Races

Only birds that have completed the molt and are in the best feather condition should be selected for racing. Both wings should be full. Each should have 10 primary flight feathers that are closely held together, and 12 secondary flight feathers. There should be 12 tail flight feathers, in two sets of 6. The neck should have a good sheen.

Long before a particular race, the pigeon owner should check his records and note the condition of the birds to see which are likely to be ready to fly. Molting, which is most important, is affected by the season in which the bird is hatched; it is also affected by management and feeding of the birds.

If older birds are to be flown, the time of mating is an important date to check. Birds that have eggs or squabs in the nest will have an added reason for returning home. Females, which often make the best racers, must be flown only when they are in the proper breeding or mating stage. Male birds should not be sent away for flying at the time they are driving their mates.

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